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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to assess the extent to which taking college courses improves students' basic reading and writing skills. The study utilized data collected in fall 1983 by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) on 5,962 students in community college districts in Los Angeles, California; St. Louis, Missouri; and Miami-Dade, Florida. The CSCC studies used the General Academic Assessment (GAA) test to assess students' general education and liberal arts knowledge. Students' scores on the English usage section of the GAA and their self-ratings of their ability to edit written materials were correlated with academic background data to determine: (1) the relationship between the number of composition and reading courses taken by students and their GAA scores and self-ratings; (2) the relationship between the total number of college semester hours completed and GAA scores and self-ratings; and (3) the relationship between the date on which the student expected to qualify for an associate degree and his/her GAA score. The study found no solid evidence that the basic reading and writing skills of students improved as the students advanced through the curriculum. While students' confidence in their ability to edit written material seemed to improve with the number of reading and composition courses completed, there was no similar increase in actual writing and reading ability. (HB)

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DO COLLEGE COURSES IMPROVE BASIC READING AND WRITING SKILLS?

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Seminar Paper
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DO COLLEGE COURSES IMPROVE BASIC READING AND WRITING SKILLS?

Improving student reading and writing ability is clearly one of the major challenges facing two-year college educators today. Increased television viewing, declining academic rigor at secondary schools, and other social and educational factors have combined to limit students' reading and writing experiences. As a result, the colleges "are struggling to find ways of educating students whose prior learning has been dominated by nonprint images" (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 26).

How well are the colleges meeting this challenge? Do students in college reading and writing courses achieve gains in reading and writing ability? Does reading and writing ability improve as students advance through the curriculum? This study, based on data collected by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges in a survey of approximately 6,000 students at three urban community college districts, examines these questions. The following sections of this report present a review of related literature, an explanation of the study, an outline of hypotheses, and a discussion of results.

Literature Review

While several studies explore the impact of college reading and writing courses on student grade point average and persistence (see, for example, the reviews by Heerman, 1983; Santeusanio, 1974; and Tillman, 1972-73), relatively few examine the impact of these courses or of the curriculum in general on student reading and writing ability. Among these latter studies, however, three categories can be identified: (1) studies that measure the pre- and posttest gains of students in reading and writing

courses; (2) studies that measure the correlation between the number of reading and writing courses taken by students and their reading and writing ability; and (3) studies that measure the correlation between the total number of courses taken in all curricular areas and student reading and writing ability. These analyses sometimes come to contradictory conclusions and, at best, provide only limited support for the hypothesis that improvement in reading and writing ability is a function of college course-taking.

Studies examining the pretest-posttest gains of students in college reading programs yield mixed findings concerning the impact of the programs on reading rate (i.e., speed), vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Carpenter and Jones (1975) conclude that in most cases college reading improvement courses have only a limited effect on reading ability; the research they cite (covering the years 1968 through 1972) indicates that students in college reading classes experience gains in reading rate, only some gains in vocabulary, and no gains in comprehension. Yet there is no dearth of studies indicating more favorable results. Bloomer (1962) and Olson and others (1964) both deterimed (in independent studies at two different universities) that college students in reading classes achieved significantly greater pretest-posttest gains in reading rate and comprehension than did control group students who, during the same semester, were not undergoing reading instruction. In another analysis, Stebens and Pelden (1972) found that students completing a one-semester reading program at Oklahoma State University achieved significant pretest-posttest gains in reading rate, vocabulary, and comprehension. Similarly, Smith (1983) found that students in a reading improvement course at the California State University, Northridge, demonstrated significant gains in both comprehension and vocabulary. Research, then, tends to support the assertion that college reading programs improve reading rate and vocabulary. There is less agreement,

however, as to the effect of these programs on reading comprehension.

Similarly, there is only mixed evidence that college writing courses effect pretest-posttest gains in writing ability. In a study involving students in five remedial writing courses and 19 transfer-level writing courses at 14 two-year colleges, Cohen (1973) compared student essays written at the beginning of the courses with essays written at the end of the courses. While the students showed significant improvement in overall writing ability, content, and organization, neither the remedial students nor the transfer-level students demonstrated significant gains in writing mechanics. Rollins (1979) found a similar pattern in his analysis of the first and last essays written by 209 students in a community college English composition course: 59 percent of the students improved in coherence; 53 percent improved in overall writing ability; 51 percent improved in word usage; 49 percent improved in content, unity, and structure; 31 percent improved in diction; and only 29 percent improved in writing mechanics. There is evidence, then, that students in college writing courses are likely to improve their writing in terms of coherence and content. By the same token, however, students are less likely to demonstrate gains in writing mechanics.

Researchers examining the impact of writing course have also studied, with more positive results, the correlation between the number of writing courses taken by a student and his/her writing ability. McQueen and others (1963) found that the most able writers among freshmen at the University of Nevada were more likely to have taken high school English classes that require students to write at least 250 words per week. Bamberg (1978) concluded that freshmen in the remedial writing program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) took significantly fewer semesters of English in high school than did freshmen in UCLA's regular English composi-

tion courses. Bamberg further determined that the high school English classes taken by the remedial students were more likely to have been literature or creative writing courses rather than courses in expository writing or writing skills. In a similar study, Stewart (1983) concluded that UCLA freshmen scoring higher on tests of writing ability had completed significantly more semesters of English while in high school than had freshmen with lower writing scores. Though Stewart notes that socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnicity accounted for more variation in writing ability than did the students' academic backgrounds, her research, along with the studies by Bamberg and by McQueen and others, supports the theory that there is a positive correlation between the number of English courses completed and student writing ability.

Since reading and writing are practiced in almost all academic courses, it is logical to hypothesize that course work in all areas—not just reading and writing courses themselves—will help improve student reading and writing ability. Schmidt (1983) provides strong support for this theory. Using academic background and ability data collected in a survey of high school seniors participating in the National Longitudinal Study of the Class of 1972, Schmidt examined the correlation between scores earned by the students on a reading comprehension test and the quantity of schooling received by the students in each of six curricular areas: science, social studies, foreign languages, English, mathematics, and fine arts. (Quantity of schooling was defined as "the total number of hours of instruction in an area a student receives during his/her last three years of high school" p. 313.) Schmidt found that the quantity of schooling in each of the areas studied had a positive effect on reading comprehension and concluded that reading comprehension should improve as a result of more schooling in all areas.

Nonetheless, other studies correlating student quantity of schooling with reading and writing ability do not support this hypothesis. Stebens and Belden (1972) found that over a five-semester period, students entering Oklahoma State University in Fall 1963 improved significantly in overall reading ability, reading rate, and vocabulary, but not comprehension. In the area of writing, Freedman and Pringle (1980) found that essays written by high school seniors did not differ significantly in terms of unity, organization, development, and coherence from essays written by third-year college students. (The college students, however, showed significantly greater ability to write at a more complicated level of abstraction, and Freedman and Pringle speculate that the observed lack of growth in the other, more mechanical aspects of writing is explained by the cognitively more difficult themes written by the college students.) The same findings were observed by Eblen (1981) who conducted a similar study using the essays written by college freshmen and seniors. Finally, Stewart (1983) determined that writing ability of UCLA freshmen was not correlated with the frequency of writing assignments completed by students across the high school curriculum. Stewart noted that most of these assignments did not require students to submit initial drafts that could be evaluated by the instructor and rewritten; the assignments simply did not provide corrective feedback. These studies, then, do not support the hypothesis that added years of schooling (and the concomitant writing and reading practice that that schooling involves) increase the reading comprehension or writing ability of college students.

Research, in sum, provides only mixed support for the assertion that reading courses, writing courses, and the curriculum in general improve the reading and writing skills of college students. Given the evidence of the

literature, the following observations can be made:

—Students in college reading courses are likely to improve in terms of vocabulary and reading rate; research exploring the impact of reading courses on reading comprehension is inconclusive.

—While writing courses produce significant improvements in overall writing ability, they do not produce significant improvements in writing mechanics.

—There is a positive correlation between the number of writing courses taken and the student's overall writing ability.

—Writing ability and reading comprehension probably do not improve as students advance through the curriculum.

While college course-taking is correlated with improved reading rate, vocabulary, and writing content and organization, it is not strongly correlated with improvements in the basic skills of reading comprehension and writing mechanics. Student abilities in both of these skills areas are examined in the study described below.

The Study

In order to examine the relationship between college course-taking and reading and writing abiltiy, a study was conducted of the academic backgrounds and the reading and writing skill levels of students at three urban community college districts: Los Angeles (California), St. Louis (Missouri), and Miami-Dade (Florida). The data were collected in Fall 1983 by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges on the General Academic Assessment (GAA), an instrument designed to assess student knowledge in general education and the liberal arts. The GAA includes sets of test items for each of five areas: the humanities, the sciences, the social sciences, mathematics, and English usage. Additional items ask the student to provide background information such as age, the number of college semester

hours earned, educational and occupational aspirations, self assessments of basic and academic skills, and the number of courses taken in each of the five areas tested. A total of 5,962 students in randomly selected courses offering academic transfer credit completed the GAA instrument.

The GAA data utilized in this study include student scores on the English usage section of the test as well as student self-ratings of their ability to edit written material. The English usage section of the GAA tests student skills in writing mechanics and reading comprehension. Individual items in this section, drawn from tests developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the City Colleges of Chicago, ask students to identify punctuation and grammar errors in a series of sentences and to answer questions concerning the content of a brief essay. For example, students are asked to circle the letter marking the location of a punctuation error, if any, in the following sentence:

> The test of men's or women's breeding is, how they behave in a
> A B C D
> quarrel. (no error)
> E

In another example, students are asked to read an excerpt from Thomas Paine's Common Sense and then asked to answer the following question:

> According to Paine, why did Great Britain protect America?
> (A) To help America fight America's enemies
> (B) To insure that British subjects were not harmed
> (C) To further Great Britain's self-interest
> (D) To honor Great Britain's commitment as a parent country

Each GAA form includes 12 items on punctuation and grammar and four items that test reading comprehension. Scores on the English usage section are converted to a point on a one to ten scale.

Another factor measured by the GAA is student confidence in their writing ability. Specifically, students are asked to rate themselves on ability to edit written material. This self-rating is made on a one to four scale, with one equaling "poor" and four equaling "excellent."

In order to examine the possible correlation between college course-taking and reading and writing ability, the English usage and self-rating scores for students with varying academic backgrounds were calculated and compared. Academic background was measured in terms of the number of reading and writing courses completed while at college, the total number of college semester hours completed, and the date students expect to qualify for the associate degree (June 1984 or June 1985). The study considered only degree-seeking students whose native language is English. Students who already have a degree and students who are in college to fulfill a personal interest were eliminated from the analysis.

Five hypotheses were tested in the study. Each is based on the literature, which indicates that college course-taking may not improve student reading comprehension or writing mechanics.

Hypothesis I. There will be no relationship between the number of composition and reading courses taken by students at college and their scores on the English usage section of the GAA.

Hypothesis II. There will be no relationship between the number of composition and reading courses taken by students at college and their self-rating scores on the ability to edit written material.

Hypothesis III. There will be no relationship between the total number of college semester hours completed by students and their scores on the English usage section of the GAA.

Hypothesis IV. There will be no relationship between the total number of college semester hours completed by students and their self-rating

scores on the ability to edit written material.

Hypothesis V. There will be no relationship between the date on which a student expects to qualify for the associate degree and his/her score on the English usage section of the GAA.

Findings

The following paragraphs summarize study findings for each of the five hypotheses.

Hypothesis I. The study found no correlation between the number of reading and writing courses taken and student scores on the English usage section of the GAA. Table 1 presents the mean English usage scores for students who had completed varying numbers of English composition and reading courses at college. The relationship between the number of courses taken and the English usage score is not linear, and the mean for those who had completed only one course is higher than the mean for those who had taken two or more courses. Therefore, the hypothesis cannot be rejected.

However, it is quite possible that these results are explained by large numbers of students taking remedial reading and writing courses; the skill level of these students would be quite low to begin with. The GAA questions concerning student academic background do not ask students to distinguish between remedial and transfer-level courses.

Hypothesis II. Study findings do, however, indicate that student self-confidence in the ability to edit written material increases with the number of reading and writing courses completed. Table 2 presents mean self-ratings on ability to edit written material; means are reported for students who had completed varying numbers of English composition and reading courses at college. The data are linear, and, although the

differences between cells are slight, a one-way analysis of variance indicates that they are significant at the .01 level. As students take more composition and reading courses, then, they appear to gain at least some self-confidence in their ability to edit written material.

Hypothesis III. The data are less helpful in analyzing the relationship between the number of college credits completed and student scores on the English usage section of the GAA. Table 3 presents mean English usage scores for students who had completed varying numbers of college semester hours. Again, the data are linear, and the differences between cells, though slight, are significant at the .01 level. Nonetheless, the data are difficult to interpret. The declining number of students between cells indicates that large numbers of students drop out or transfer before completing 60 semester hours. It is possible, then, that the small number of remaining students with 60 or more semester hours had above average reading and writing skill levels to begin with and that those skill levels actually declined or remained the same as the students progressed through the curriculum. On the basis of this data, then, no judgement can be made concerning the relationship between reading and writing ability and the number of college courses completed.

Hypothesis IV. No strong relationship was found between the number of semester hours completed and student self-ratings on the ability to edit written material. Table 4 presents the mean self-ratings of editing ability; means are reported for students who had completed varying numbers of college semester hours. The relationship between the number of semester hours completed and self-ratings on ability to edit written material is not quite linear. Indeed, the mean self-rating for students who had completed 30 to 44 credits was larger than the mean for students who had completed 45 to 59 credits. Thus, the hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Hypothesis V. The study also determined that students who are only one year away from receiving the associate degree did not score significantly higher on the English usage section of the GAA than students who are two or more years away from qualifying for the associate degree. Table 5 presents the mean English usage scores for students who expect to qualify for the associate degree in June 1984 and students who expect to earn the associate degree in June 1985. At first glance, it would appear that students who are close to receiving the associate degree (and who have thus completed more courses) have higher reading and writing skill levels than do students who are not close to receiving the associate degree. An analysis of variance, however, reveals that this difference is not statistically significant at an acceptable level. (Indeed, the ANOVA yielded and F value with a significance level of .59.) Thus, Hypothesis V cannot be rejected.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study was conducted to determine if reading courses, writing courses, and the curriculum in general help to improve student reading and writing ability. The study findings provide no solid evidence that the basic reading and writing skills of students (in terms of punctuation, grammar, and writing comprehension) improve as students advance through the curriculum. While students' confidence in their ability to edit written material seemed to improve with the number of reading and composition courses completed, there was no similar increase in actual reading and writing ability. In addition, reading and writing skill levels did not tend to increase as students completed more college semester hours; indeed, there was no significant difference between the English usage scores earned by students who expected to receive

the associate degree within one academic year and the English usage scores earned by students who expected to earn the associate degree in two or more academic years. By the same token, there was no strong relationship between the total number of semester hours completed by students and their self-confidence ratings on the ability to edit written material. These findings, then, provide guarded support for the hypothesis that reading comprehension and writing mechanics skills do not improve as students take reading and writing courses or as students complete more units toward a degree.

These findings should not be misinterpreted as a condemnation of college reading and writing programs. Indeed, all evidence indicates that students do benefit from such courses in terms of improved reading rate and ability to put together cohesive essays on complex topics. Nonetheless, the colleges seem to have little impact on student development in the areas of writing mechanics and reading comprehension. This could have serious consequenses as the skill levels of entering students continue to decline. Without significant improvement in the ability of colleges to upgrade student reading and writing skills, colleges may be faced with higher attrition rates or, conversely, with the necessity of lowering academic standards.

Table 1

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the English Usage Test, by Number of Composition and Reading Courses Completed

No. Courses Completed	Mean Score	SD	N
0 Courses Completed	5.20	2.25	1,126
1 Course Completed	5.48	2.31	1,067
2 Courses Completed	5.32	2.18	797
3 or More Courses	5.25	2.30	442

Table 2

Self-Ratings of Ability to Edit Written Material,
by Number of Composition and Reading Courses Completed

No. Courses Completed	Mean Self-Rating	SD	N
0 Courses Completed	2.44	0.84	1,113
1 Course Completed	2.56	0.87	1,054
2 Courses Completed	2.57	0.85	786
3 Courses Completed	2.66	0.89	440

Table 3

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the GAA English Usage Section by Total Number of College Semester Hours Completed

No. of Semester Hours Completed	Mean Scores	SD	N
0 - 14	5.12	2.24	1,147
15 - 29	5.35	2.24	799
30 - 44	5.43	2.20	667
45 - 59	5.44	2.26	493
60 or more	5.76	2.32	302

Table 4

Self-Ratings of Ability to Edit Written Material, by Total Number of Semester Hours Completed

No. of Semester Hours Completed	Mean Self-Rating	SD	N
0 - 14	2.45	0.83	1,132
15 - 29	2.54	0.85	783
30 - 44	2.61	0.87	662
45 - 59	2.59	0.86	490
60 or more	2.63	0.93	301

Table 5

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for the GAA English Usage Section, by Date on which Students Expect to Qualify for the Associate Degree

Expected Date of Qualification	Mean Scores	SD	N
June 1984	5.31	2.31	937
June 1985 or later	5.26	2.23	2,187

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